

New Zealand's MATAKANA WINEGROWERS



Outside the main wine centers of New Zealand are some truly interesting areas, including this small, picturesque region.

UNTIL RELATIVELY RECENTLY, New Zealand and wine in the same sentence would provoke a discussion of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. Then attention was drawn to some high-quality Pinot Noir, notably from the Central Otago and Martinborough regions. As the first decade of the new century moves to a close, the New Zealand wine industry has intensified in both the variety and level of production, and overall quality has increased substantially.

There has been significant growth in numbers of registered wineries, from 334 in 1999 to 582 in 2008. Vineyard expansion in Marlborough has slowed a little in the last three years yet still reached a whopping 13,647 hectares in 2007, up from a mere 3,477 in 1997. Central Otago had 207 hectares planted in 1999 and now has 1,613.

A key concept in New Zealand is keeping it "clean and green." This year, a sustainable viticulture initiative was adopted by Winegrowers New Zealand, the governing body of the wine community here, with the intention of having all grapes and wines produced under independently audited sustainability schemes by 2012. Biodynamic and organic practices continue to gain popularity across the country, both sitting comfortably within the objective of sustainability.

There are officially 10 major wine regions from Northland to Otago, although other interesting areas are appearing. Lake Taupo in the central North Island has 11 vineyards, with five producing wine. Here is also the most southerly winery in the world, Weston Winery in Dunedin.

Outside the main wine centers of New Zealand are some truly interesting sub-regions. An hour north of Auckland is the small,

picturesque region of Matakana. Vineyards in the area are spread between Mahurangi (south) and Ti Point (north). Most of the producers are just to the northeast of Matakana village, very close to the coast on rolling hillsides. Wine geeks who visit the area often ask how grapes can grow and ripen in the lush, moist and sometimes humid conditions.



The answer is site selection and sun exposure. Viticultural challenges encompass the expected mildew and botrytis variety, although, fortunately, the entire area is virtually frost free. To cope with moisture, various specialty grasses are grown between the vines, and feeder roots close to the surface are cut to encourage the growth of tap roots. Irrigation is not necessary. Soils are quite generic across the region. A thin layer of top soil (as little as 2 inches covers iron-rich yellow, with red sandy clays and clay loams. To control vine vigour, VSP, Guyot and 'U' or Lyre are the most common vine training systems used. Where other vignerons around New Zealand might mulch their winter prunings into the soils, most producers here burn theirs to assist in the control of disease.

Like many of the first wine and fruit areas established in New Zealand, wine growing in Matakana was established initially by immigrants from the Adriatic coastal regions that are now known as Croatia, Lebanon and the former Dalmatia. The first alcoholic beverage known to be produced in the area was made by Russian immigrant Alexis Migounoff just prior to World War II. His Lemora grapefruit wine and a fortified version of the same was stored in used French brandy barrels and was reportedly good for arthritis; it was sold in local Chemist shops! Sometime later, the Katavich family produced alcohol from raisinated grapes. The Unkovich family made and sold Port and Sherry in the 1950s, eventually establishing the Kowhai brand, which is no longer in existence. The "Dallies" (an affectionate local term) were well known throughout the Auckland and Northland regions for their fortified beverages, and still form the strong basis of many existing and famous wineries, notably the Brajkovich's of Kumeu River and Fistonich's of Villa Maria.

Production levels and quality sufficient for commercial wine sales in Matakana were only really established in the early 1980s. The Antipodean, a Bordeaux style wine made by the Vuletic brothers, James and Petar, was of a high standard and highly sought after. Later, in the early 1990s, James Vuletic established his own brand, Providence, which is still in production and exported today. These wines are somewhat expensive but worth the investment. The Providence Vineyard, like so many in the area, is small but a very interesting site to visit.

Around the same time as the Antipodean, David Hoskins and wife Mary Evans established Heron's Flight Winery. Their first releases, of Cabernet and Chardonnay, were in 1991, but they had a change of focus in the mid 1990s after a chance meeting over a bottle of Tuscan wine led to a complete change in vinifera plantings. High-quality Sangiovese and Dolcetto now dominate the wine line-up at Heron's Flight.

According to Robin Ransom, chairman of the Matakana Winegrowers, a total of 31 growers across 90 hectares represent the area. Only 11 make their wine on site, with most others having their wine made locally. There are no large production companies in the line-up, and the focus is on quality not quantity, and on preserving the uniqueness of the area.

Other Matakana producers of note include Brick Bay, Ransom, Takatu and Ascension. Brick Bay grows Pinot Gris, Cabernet, Merlot and Malbec. With a serious focus on quality both in the vineyard and in the wine, Brick Bay produces little more than 1,000 cases annually. There is also a fabulous sculpture walk on the vineyard site. Owners Christine and Richard Didsbury have taken a lead in developing and maintaining

the special nature of the area and are also directly concerned with the development of the village area.

Ransom produces both barrel-fermented and oak-free Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, two Clarets and a straight Carmenere. Father-and-son winemakers Robin and Gabe Ransom seem to have captured the essence of the local terroir in their wines.

Planted from 2000 the Takatu Vineyard has approximately 3 hectares under vine. Merlot, Malbec and Franc dominate, but a small plot of



OPPOSITE PAGE: Autumn and the end of harvest at Brick Bay Winery, with the Glasshouse Tasting Room in the foreground. **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Crossroads pointing to some of the beautiful Matakana region's beaches, with Providence Vineyard in the background. Ransom Wines tasting room, winery and café at Warkworth, the doorway to the Matakana region. Post harvest at Ascension Vineyard. The Ascension Wine Estate.

Pinot Gris shows immense promise in a dry style. John and Heather Forsman also host guests at the Takatu luxury lodge.

The name Soljan is inextricably linked to winemaking in New Zealand. Darryl Soljan and wife Bridget are fifth generation vignerons and continue the family passion through their 12-acre Ascension Vineyard. Producing around 7,000 cases annually, much of the wine (including Viognier, Pinot Gris and Riesling) is enjoyed on-site through their restaurant and function facilities. Flora is probably the most unusual grape planted here, but their 'Epiphany,' a Bordeaux-style red is their most passionate expression.

What's the most exciting wine I have tasted from Matakana? Syrah. You better believe it! The Ransom 2007 and the soon-to-be-released Providence 2005 are firm, dry and delicious Rhone styled wines.



GUEST CONTRIBUTOR Cameron Douglas recently became New Zealand's first and only Master Sommelier with the International Court of Master Sommeliers. He is, in fact, the only M.S. in the Australasia area. He is the senior lecturer in charge of the Wine and Beverage Program at AUT University, a resident wine writer for *Hospitality Magazine* and an associate wine judge for *Cuisine Magazine*. He writes independently for other national and international publications and is in demand as a speaker.